The muse of lament or the muse of compassion?

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The Muse of Lament or the Muse of Compassion? The Reception of Anna Akhmatova in Great Britain.

Anna Akhmatova's poetry is well known in Great Britain. One of the first references to Akhmatova appeared in the periodical *The Athenaeum* in October 1915: the author of the review, which featured a number of recently published Russian books, characterised her as "an exquisite poetess who, though quite young, had already established a school".[1] Akhmatova had several personal ties with England. Yet she became better known in England not through the memoirs of her friends but through numerous publications related to her life and poetry produced by scholars, literary critics and translators. Their praise for Akhmatova secured her a firm place in the European poetic canon. This chapter will demonstrate how the current engagement with Akhmatova's poetry is rooted in the long history of interpreting and translating her verse in Great Britain. Not only was Akhmatova awarded an honorary degree of Doctors of Letters by the University of Oxford in 1965, she was described by the presenter of the award as "a poetess of the highest distinction most justly by

some critics called the Russian Sappho".[2] Her physical beauty and her image of the suffering person who had a gift for empathising with others was immortalised in Boris Anrep's mosaic located in the National Gallery in London near the entrance from Trafalgar Square. The mosaic floor that Anrep created portrays famous people of his time, scenes of everyday life and allegorical figures symbolically representing art, literature, architecture and science. Olga Kaznina elucidates the meaning of Anrep's mosaic thus: "The cycle was completed in 1933 and included portraits of outstanding contemporaries of Anrep such as ancient gods and goddesses. Osbert Sitwell, the man of letters and theoretician of the latest trends in art, was portrayed as Apollo, while Clive Bell appeared as Bacchus. They were surrounded by the nine muses, the inspirers of the arts and sciences, among whom were Lidia Lopokova as the muse of dance, Terpsichore, and Greta Garbo as Melpomene, the muse of tragedy".[3] She also talks about the image of Akhmatova immortalised in Anrep's mosaic and points out that the striking image of Akhmatova was placed among several famous European contemporaries of hers as part of a series of mosaics with the general title "Modern Virtues". Kaznina describes it as follows: "The background of the mosaic is a picture of hell on earth – people writhe in torment, whilst over them like a guardian angel hovers a female figure, easily recognisable as Akhmatova from contemporary portraits. The image of Akhmatova symbolises 'Compassion', the very essence of the Christian soul".[4] In Kaznina's opinion, it was a fitting image for Akhmatova's personality and art because her poetry displays a sense of religious depth. Yet, Kaznina affirms, Anrep's aesthetic and formal religiosity would have not been acceptable by Akhmatova.[5] Kaznina's observation notwithstanding, it is fair to say that Anrep's image of Akhmatova contributed to her canonisation in England as a poet who advocates compassion and empathy.

As Rebecca Beasley reminds us, the British canon of Russian literature "was largely created by a small number of amateur translators and critics".[6] The creative output and critical works produced by personal friends of Akhmatova contributed further to her inclusion into the twentieth-century poetic canon both in Russia and in Europe. As Kaznina points out, Anrep learnt about Akhmatova's fame as a poet and about the poems she dedicated to him in the early 1940s from the prominent Russian émigré critic Gleb Struve who was living in London during that period.[7] Kaznina also suggests that Akhmatova's meeting with Sir Isaiah Berlin in Leningrad in 1946 led to the invitation issued to her to visit England in June 1965. As Kaznina points out, Akhmatova was invited to the UK in order to receive an honorary doctorate at Oxford.[8] In the space that follows I would like to outline the most important aspects of the reception of Akhmatova's poetry in Great Britain and demonstrate that her life and poetry continue to inspire British contemporary critics, writers and poets today.

One of the first critics who wrote about Akhmatova in English was Prince Dmitrii Sviatopolk-Mirsky, a literary critic, poet and lecturer in Russian at the School of Slavonic Studies. His 1923 review of Akhmatova's collections of poetry published in *The Slavonic Review* asserts that, since the death of Blok, Akhmatova is "admittedly the greatest living Russian poet".[9] Mirsky points out that Akhmatova's subject matter "is more broadly human and national than that of any other poet".[10] In his review that discusses several books penned by Akhmatova and written about Akhmatova, published by the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1924, Mirsky claims that Akhmatova's poetry possesses a direct and a wide human appeal. He also praises Akhmatova's craftsmanship and says that her use of the everyday language and simplicity appeal to foreign readers and translators. Yet, Mirsky suggests that the

subject matter of Akhmatova's poetry is feminine and that her attitude towards the representation of life is also feminine.

Furthermore, Mirsky compares her verse to Robert Browning's dramatic lyrics and asserts that, even though Akhmatova "has not anything of the English poet's power of creating and abundance of lifelike men and women", her poetry can be read as miniature novels that practically feature two actors: She and He. As Mirsky explains: "The men change from time to time, the heroine remains always the same, though the situations vary infinitely".[11] Mirsky reinforces the point made by many Russian critics about Akhmatova's indebtness to the Russian nineteenth-century psychological novel and states that almost every poem of Akhmatova might be read as "a psychological novel compressed to eight or twelve lines".[12] Mirsky's statement about the influence of the nineteenth-century novel on Akhmatova's poetry was conveyed at a time when the novels authored by Dostoevsky and Tolstoy enjoyed an amazing popularity among British readers. The success of Russian writers in Britain is well captured in Virginia Woolf's 1925 essay "The Russian Point of View" published in *The Common Reader*, in which Woolf admits the influence of Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Tolstoy on her own mode of writing. She identifies the genius for sympathy, spiritual equality of fellow-sufferers and honesty as the main characteristics of Russian literature that provides, in her view, a good lesson for British writers by suggesting that everyone, whether "noble or simple, a tramp or a great lady," equally possesses a soul worth exploring.[13]

In the light of Woolf's observations on the main thrust of Russian literature, it is hardly surprising that some contemporaries of Mirsky did not view Akhmatova as an exclusively female poet whose responses to the tragic and melancholic moments of everyday life are conveyed in a specifically feminine idiom. Thus, in 1923, *The*

Slavonic Review published Akhmatova's 1915 poem "The Wounded Crane", translated by Oliver Elton.[14] Elton (1861-1945) was a close friend of Pablo Picasso and an eminent English literary scholar whose publications include the six-volume study *A Survey of English Time (1730-1880)*. Elton's fluency in several languages enabled him to publish numerous translations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry that emerged from different countries, including Russia. In 1937 he translated Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin's novel in verse *Eugene Onegin*. Elton's 1923 translation of Akhmatova's poem "The Wounded Crane" (1915) renders well the phonetic structure of the original and reproduces successfully the solemn and melancholic atmosphere conveyed in Akhmatova's lyric. Here is the first stanza:

> Even thus, unto the wounded crane
> The rest their trumpet-call repeat,
> When, all around, the autumnal plain
> Lies crumbling in the heat.[15]

The above translation does not preserve the exact sound of cranes featured in the original ("Tak ranenogo zhuravlia/ Zovut drugie: kurly, kurly"[16]) but it describes well the effect on the listener of the noises produced by the cranes. The trumpet-like quality of their sound creates a sense of mystery and adds sublime overtones to the description of autumn. At the same time, it invokes both the trumpets used by angels in the Book of Revelation of the New Testament and the image of the Archangel Michael holding a trumpet as featured in Natal'ia Gonchrova's 1914 collection of lithographs that represent mystical images of war.[17] It also helps the translator to render in English the frequent occurrence of the sound "r" found in the original, bringing together such words as "crane," "the rest," "trumpet," "around" and "crumbling". The sound effects of the translation enable the reader to visualise better

the melancholic landscape depicted in the original, especially because of their onomatopoetic quality: the sound of cranes permeates the phonetic structure of the translation and reminds the reader of autumn. Both texts refer to the sound of the Common Crane (Grus grus) that is widely known in Russia and in Scandinavia as well as in some parts of Northern Europe. Small numbers pass through Britain in spring and autumn, and there is a small breeding population in eastern England. Akhmatova's poetic image of the crane associated with the sublime would have been analogous to the English reader to the poem "The Crane" included in Wilfrid Gibson's 1917 collection of poetry *Poems: 1904-1917*.[18] Both poems were written in the 1910s and are characterised by the power of brevity.

Akhmatova's lyrics resemble strongly Gibson's war poetry that displays brevity, simplicity and subdued irony. As Roland Bartel and Diana Grandberry observe, war poetry is often compressed and powerful. They write: "When poets write about war, they often express their strongest feelings in very few words. Examples of this compression can be found in one or two lines as well as in short poems".[19] Given that Elton was a Professor of English literature working for the University of Liverpool from 1901 until 1925 and that his interest in Russian and Serbian literatures was triggered by World War I, it would not be an exaggeration to say that his selection of Akhmatova's poems for translation was informed by his awareness of the importance of directness and realism of the poetry associated with trauma and war experiences. It is not coincidental that he preserves the passive construction of the original ("in the same way the wounded crane gets called by other cranes…") and translates it as "even thus, unto the wounded crane…" in order to underline the traumatic effect of war on its survivors and witnesses. In other words, Akhmatova's poem about the wounded crane that metonymically represents the narrator as a

wounded bird would have been well received by contemporary readers in Britain who had similar experiences and who would have read British war poetry that is usually appreciated for its effectiveness, directness and brevity.

In the early 1920s, Akhmatova's poetry gained more attention due to the efforts of numerous translators to make her works better known in English speaking countries. Thus the publication of the first anthology of Russian modern poetry in English in 1923 included several of her poems, including such poems as "Like a White Stone," "Confession," "Broad Gold, the Evening," and "Prayer".[20] The editors and translators of the 1923 anthology describe Akhmatova's verse as the poetry of a talented lyricist. In their view, it is especially rewarding to read it because of "its classic tendency and its insistence on purely personal themes". They also mention that its "sophisticated simplicity" would delight the reader.[21] We can see how the simplicity and the classical quality of Akhmatova's language made it very appealing to readers still affected by World War I experiences and who shied away from the highly experimental modes of expressions found in the style of Futurism and Dadaism. In the light of the growing interest in Akhmatova's literary output, it is not surprising that in 1926 Mirsky devoted several pages to her poetry in his influential book *A History of Russian Literature.* It remains one of the most insightful and comprehensive textbooks on Russian literature in English available to students and scholars today.

As mentioned above, Mirsky's initial responses to Akhmatova's poetry were lukewarm and cautious. It is difficult to say whether he changed his opinion of Akhmatova as a consequence of the English critics' praise for her, or due to his friendship with Marina Tsvetaeva who was an enthusiastic admirer of Akhmatova's verse in the 1910s-20s. In the textbook, Mirsky's appreciation of Akhmatova is felt at

the beginning of his sub-chapter dedicated specifically to her poetry and life. It states: "The greatest name connected with acmeism and the Poets' Guild is that of Anna Akhmatova".[22] In addition to the above, Mirsky claims that Akhmatova's book *Rosary* (Chetki) "made her at once famous, and went into more editions than any other book of verse of the new school".[23] Mirsky defines Akhmatova's poetry as being highly personal, autobiographical, realistic and vividly concrete. He also praises how her poems are easy to visualise and that they often display feelings in simple and "intelligible human language", and highlighted the technical perfection of Akmatova's verse.[24] For his analysis of Akhmatova's poetry, Mirsky supplemented his chapter with quotes taken from the translations undertaken by the Russian émigrée Nathalie Duddington. Duddington was the daughter of the Russian writer Alexander Ivanovich Ertel (1855-1908). She studied philosophy at the University of London.[25] Duddington translated several works written by Russian philosophers and in 1913, together with famous Russian religious philosopher Nikolai Lossky, published the article "Intuitionalism".[26] As a translator of Russian literature she is well known for her translations of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. It appears that Duddington's translations of Akhmatova's lyrics were available to Mirsky before the publication of the collection of Akhmatova's love poetry in London because it was published only in 1927.[27] Albeit Mirsky claims that the technical perfection of Akhmatova's lyrics is difficult to match in English translations, he gives an example of his own translation of Akhmatova's poem "Ever since St Agrafena's day…" ("So dnia kupal'nitsy Agrafeny…", 1913). It preserves the intonation and the simplicity of the original text. In his version of Akhmatova's poem, Mirsky brings to the fore, like Elton before him, the directness and the realism of Akhmatova's poetic expression.

One of the perceptive remarks in Mirsky's chapter on Akhmatova is related to her poetry writing of 1914, including her prophetic poem "July 1914". It was written in anticipation of Russia's involvement in the World War I. Mirsky writes about the 1914 poems in an insightful manner: "It is an austerer and sterner style, and its subject matter is tragic – the ordeal her country entered on after the beginning of the war. The easy and graceful meters of her early verse are now replaced by the stern and solemn heroic stanza and similar measures. At moments her voice reaches a rude and somber majesty that makes one think of Dante. Without ceasing to be feminine in feeling, it becomes 'manly' and 'virile'. This new style gradually ousts her early manner, and in *Anno Domini* it even invades her love lyrics and becomes the dominant note of her work".[28] It is clear that, while Mirsky aspired to inscribe Akhmatova's name into the European poetic canon, he also wanted to bring Akhmatova's verse closer to the lovers of modernist poetry in England who would recognise some themes and philosophical concerns embedded in the poetry of T.S. Eliot. In his essay "Dante", included in the 1921 collection of essays *Sacred Wood*, Eliot affirms that Dante's representation of emotions is the most comprehensive and "the most *ordered* that has ever been made".[29] According to Eliot, Dante "does not analyse the emotion so much as he exhibits its relation to other emotions".[30] In the style of Eliot's article, Mirsky talks about the intensity of emotions embedded in Akhmatova's poetry. Mirsky asserts that Akhmatova's civic poetry "can scarcely be termed political" because it is beyond "the medley of parties". Mirsky describes it as "religious and prophetic". He also talks about the effect of her poetic speech upon the reader: "One feels in her voice the authority of one who has the power to judge and at once a heart that feels with more than common intensity".[31]

Mirsky's analysis of Akhmatova's verse focuses on the poet's ability to express a genuine emotion. Such a perspective testifies to how Mirsky was interested in highlighting the embodiment of modernist universalism and cosmopolitanism in Akhmatova's works. The notions of universalism and cosmopolitanism were very important both for Mirsky and for Eliot whose literary journals – *The Criterion* and *Milestones* (Versty) respectively – were eager to bring together literatures and cultures of different countries. As Olga Ushakova noted, Mirsky was an active contributor to Eliot's periodical and modeled the journal *Milestones* (which he co-founded in Paris in 1926, together with Sergei Efron and Tsvetaeva) on *The Criterion.*[32] It appears that Mirsky's reading of Akhmatova through the prism of Eliot's poetry and criticism is not entirely unjustified if we take account that Akhmatova admired Eliot's poetry. She shared a special kinship with him. The bond between the two poets was observed in the article penned by John Simon. He elucidates: "I do see a poet with an original vision and a personal voice who manages to maintain her individual talent within the tradition. No wonder she admired T. S. Eliot".[33] The similarities between the interpretations of the past through the prism of the present manifested in the works of Akhmatova and Eliot might be partially explained by Dostoevsky's influence upon both. While the influence of the nineteenth-century Russian novel on Akhmatova's poetry was highlighted in Osip Mandel'shtam's essay "A Letter about Russian Poetry,"[34] Ushakova identified a strong bond between Eliot and Dostoevsky. As she puts it, the 1920s issues of *The Criterion* "clearly reflect the British cult of Dostoevsky between 1912 and the early 1920s".[35] In her unpublished paper on Eliot and Akhmatova, Ushakova also describes Dante as a canonical figure who influenced both Eliot and Akhmatova.[36] Some scholars go further and talk about the existence of a creative dialogue between

Akhmatova and Eliot. Thus, for example, in his article on both poets, Ethan Lewis interprets the allusions to Eliot's poems in Akhmatova's long poem 'Poem without a Hero" (Poema bez geroia) as a concealed homage to Eliot. In Lewis's opinion, the pairing of Akhmatova's "Poem without a Hero" with Eliot's "The Waste Land" brings to the fore Eliot's implicit critique "of congenital isolation".[37]

Yet, John Bayley, a Thomas Warton Professor of English at Oxford and one of the finest interpreters of Russian poetry in England, makes a bolder statement in pointing out the uniqueness of Akhmatova's poetic persona. He writes: "She is not in the least like Blake or Eliot, and yet those are the English poets – different as they are – who offer some sort of parallel with her finest work. The incongruity of coupling such names shows how exceptional is her own poetic being".[38] Bayley's comment notwithstanding, it would be useful to point out that in 2009 Kirsten Painter compellingly argued that the similarities between Akhmatova and Eliot were striking, especially in their styles of their self-embodiment in poetry. She says that both poets "utilise body language to accentuate the contradiction between spoken and unspoken thoughts and to imply a narrative that lies beyond the frame" to the extent that the poetic persona becomes objectified and the inner world becomes revealed indirectly "through external gestures and things".[39] Akhmatova's poem "The Wounded Crane," discussed above, exemplifies the somatic aesthetics of estrangement that was built into modernist literary theory and practice. It could be also read as an allegorical depiction of readership since it presupposes human beings that are capable mimetically (emphatically) project themselves into any narrated or dramatised scenes they encounter through reading. Douglas Robinson defines such an infectious aspect of readership and spectatorship as "the inward movement of the somatic exchange, whereby through somatic mimteticism we internalise other people's body language as

feeling or sensation".[40] Mirsky's above-mentioned observation on the visual aspects of Akhmatova's poetry could be understood as a manifestation of somatic mimeticism that derives from how traumatic experiences embedded in Akhmatova's works resist verbal expression and are often detected through the incongruity of bodily gestures and language.

In addition to Mirsky's above-mentioned chapter, the exceptional quality of Akhmatova's poetry was also praised by London-born R. D. Charques (1899–1959) who was best known as a literary critic for *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The New York* Times. In his 1927 review of Duddington's translation of Akhmatova's love poetry, Charques underscores the intimacy of Akhmatova's poetry as one of her most appealing qualities and, like Mirsky before him, describes her poems as dramatic lyrics in the vein of Browning.[41] In his opinion, Duddington captured well the freshness and the warmth of the sentiment embedded in the originals and succeeded in rendering Akhmatova's ability to manipulate everyday words in English to such an extent that the dramatic effect of her lyrics had been preserved in translations. Albeit the critic did not refer to Viktor Shklovsky's seminal 1917 article "Art as Technique," he pinpointed the use of estrangement in Akhmatova's lyrics more perceptively than did Mirsky.

The above-discussed reviews and responses to Akhmatova's poetry demonstrate well that World War I brought Russian and British modernists closer together. As Olga Kaznina notes, "The turn of the twentieth century, the years of World War I and of the Russian Revolution are marked not only by the unprecedented influence of Russian culture throughout Europe but also by the living presence of a significant number of Russians in its cultural capitals. Interest in Russia and Russians was sharpened by a war that united the British, French and Russians in a military

alliance. However, even hostile Germany was gripped by Russian influences, particularly in the field of literature".[42] In addition to Kaznina's account of the growing interest in Russian culture in Europe, it should be mentioned that the wider scholarly and political engagement with Eastern Europe and Oriental studies took place in Europe and in America in the 1900s-1910s. The list of examples of such an engagement include the creation of the Deutsche Gesellschaft zum Studium Osteuropas in 1913; the establishment of the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at the University of London; the opening of the first Institut d'Études Slaves in Paris in 1919; and the launching of a Society for the Advancement of Slavonic Study in 1919. Commenting on the rapid formation of East European discourse in Europe after World War I, Ezequiel Adamovsky observes that this development was linked to the desire of the Western powers to redraw the map of Eastern Europe. He also talks about the growth of academic populations related to Eastern Europe: "In that context, interest in Slavonic studies spread to different universities in Europe and specialised institutes and periodical publications were established, forming a network of supporting institutions for the new discourse".[43] In light of the above-described developments, it is not surprising that modern Russian poetry was used for teaching purposes, since it could be easily memorised. As demonstrated above, numerous textbooks and anthologies featuring Russian poetry started to emerge in the 1910s-20s. With many lyrics of Akhmatova being short and easy to memorise, it would be safe to say that both the subject matter and the technical brilliance of her verse appeared highly appealing both for students and for scholars alike.

The second wave of the significant interest in Akhmatova's poetry took place in the 1940s-60s. Although she was never seen primarily as a war poet by English readers, some translations of her war poetry appeared in British periodicals. For

example in 1945 the journal published by the University of London *The Slavonic and East European Review* included Akhmatova's 1942 poem "Courage" in its January issue. The poem was translated into English by Vivian de Solo Pinto, the World War I veteran and an eminent British poet, critic and historian who was a leading scholarly authority on D.H. Lawrence. His translation of Akhmatova's poem was included into the anthology of Soviet war poetry published in London in 1945.[44]

In the post-Stalin era, Akhmatova's lyrics were rediscovered by younger poets such as Joseph Brodsky, Evgenii Evtushenko and Bella Akhmadulina. The rise of interest in poetry in Russia associated with the young poets of the Thaw period who rediscovered their modernist predecessors became noticed by specialists in Russian literature outside Russia. Thus in 1959 Robin Kemball, the Swiss scholar of British origin, published several translations of the lyrics of Aleksandr Blok and Akhmatova in the October issue of the American journal *Russian Review.* The list of poems translated by Kemball includes such poems as: "That city, loved…." (1929); "Prayer" (1915); and "When Russia, racked by self-perdition" (1917). In the 1970s Kemball also translated Akhmatova's long poem "Requiem". It was included in the 1976 collection of Akhmatova's poetry edited by Walter Arndt, a well known translator of Pushkin's poetry into English.[45] Kemball's publication of Akhmatova's poetry was followed by the publication of Akhmatova's poems "The Muse" and "For us to lose our candor of words and heart…" in the September issue of the prestigious journal *Poetry* in 1961. The poems were translated by Stanley Burnshaw, a well-known American poet, critic and translator whose 1970 study *The Seamless Web* demonstrates poetry's inextricable link with the human body in all its functions. Needless to say, Akhmatova's poetry might have caught his eye due to the powerful somatic responses to modernity embedded in her verse.

The publication in Munich in 1963 of Akhmatova's long poem "Requiem" (Rekviem) about Stalin's purges was welcomed by many British and American scholars and critics who saw it as an important reflection of the tragedy of many thousands of Russian women victimised by the regime. On 26 June 1964 an anonymous journalist published an article on Akhmatova in *The Times* that reported about the rehabilitation of Akhmatova in the Soviet Union. The article states: "The rehabilitation of Anna Akhmatova, a poetess who had been a victim of Stalin's postwar literary purges, was made complete and definite today".[46] The article welcomes how on Akhmatova's 75th birthday the Soviet newspaper *Literary Newspaper* (Literaturnaia gazeta) published Akhmatova's photograph accompanied by a friendly survey of her life and work. On 2 June 1965 *The Times* published another article devoted to Akhmatova in which the editors told their British readers about Akhmatova's expected arrival in Great Britain in relation to the honorary degree awarded her by the University of Oxford. In the article, Akhmatova was characterised as "Russia's first and probably greatest and woman poet" who wrote "intensely personal poems" that could be described as direct and reserved. The article highlights how Akhmatova's poems written in the last sixty years "dwelt on the themes of love and the individual's agony during the Stalinist terror".[47]

Despite numerous publications devoted to Akhmatova in the 1960s in Great Britain and in the USA, the first biography of Akhmatova in English – *Anna Akhmatova: A Poetic Pilgrimage* – was published in Oxford only in 1976. It was written by Amanda Haight who completed her doctoral thesis on Akhmatova for the University of London. Haight published several letters from Akhmatova's personal archive prior to producing her critical biography of the poet. The scholar came to know Akhmatova in person during the last two years of Akhmatova's life and spent

much time with Akhmatova in London, Oxford and in Paris in 1965 when Akhmatova was invited to England in order to receive her honorary doctorate at Oxford. Haight's PhD supervisor Professor Peter Norman also met with Akhmatova in 1965 and produced a recording of Akhmatova's recital of her poems in Paris as well as of a talk about his personal reminiscences about their meetings in London and in Paris.[48] Following the death of Akhmatova in 1966, Haight produced in 1967 an informative note about Akhmatova's longest work "Poem without a Hero" written in 1963 and published in Russian in London. In her preface, Haight said that her copy of the poem was personally approved by Akhmatova during their meeting in London in 1965 and should therefore be seen as a definitive version of the text. The publication was accompanied by useful footnotes that explained the significance of many important allusions to historical and autobiographical subtexts in the poem.[49]

The growing number of publications related to Akhmatova's poetry and life that emerged in the 1960s triggered more interest in her legacy. As a result, in 1969 Oxford University Press published the most comprehensive collection of Akhmatova's poetry in English, translated by Richard McKane. The volume contained prose translations of Akhmatova's verse imbued in places with potential rhymes and potential iambic pentameter. In 1989 McKane published a more substantial selection of Akhmatova's poetry which included 264 pages of poems that he translated. His book featured also Akhmatova's long poems together with some autobiographical notes penned by Akhmatova. Carol Rumens, a well-known contemporary British poet, praised highly this edition of Akhmatova's works. She wrote: "Whether epic or epigrammatic (and this new *Selected Poems* confirms how powerful she can be in either mood), she often expresses her sense of history by personifying it in one of the more statuesque and archetypal female modes of being:

mourning, enduring, witnessing. In order to bear witness, she had to stay put, honing her gift to a tensile strength equal to any horror that war, famine or Stalin could devise [. . .]. With so many of the later poems now in this one collection it is possible to trace the sweep of her development, and feel how the lovely early lyrics are balanced by the more tough and declarative pieces she wrote in her early seventies".[50]

It is noteworthy that the growing interest in Akhmatova's works in the 1960s-70s coincided with the discovery of Tsvetaeva's works in Great Britain. Haight, in her introductory note to the 1972 publication of the previously unpublished letter of Tsvetaeva addressed to and sent to Akhmatova on 26 April 1921, defines both women as "two outstanding Russian poets of the 20th century".[51] Haight was given a copy of the poem by Akhmatova in Moscow and in 1964. She said that the original was kept in the Tsvetaeva archive held privately by her daughter Ariadna Efron. She also suggests that Tsvetaeva's support was important to Akhmatova: "Although Akhmatova did not publicly proclaim her feelings, her regard for Tsvetaeva and the importance to her of this other woman-poet's support was shown by the fact that she carried this manuscript everywhere in her handbag until it finally disintegrated".[52] Haight's statement comes as a surprise because Akhmatova appeared to have mixed feelings about Tsvetaeva and, to some extent, she felt slightly jealous of Tsvetaeva's success among lovers of Russian poetry in the 1960s. Thus Elena Shvarts, in her 2003 autobiographical book *The Visible Side of Life* (Vidimaia storona zhizni), describes her meeting with Akhmatova in Komarovo in the early 1960s during which she told Akhmatova that her favourite poet of all time was Tsvetaeva and showed her a samizdat version of Tsvetaeva's poetry that she had in her possession. The meeting did not go well because Shvarts felt disappointed that her enthusiasm for Tsvetaeva's poetry was not shared. She left abruptly and the two poets never met again.[53] It

appears that Akhmatova wanted to promote her link with Tsvetaeva among younger readers and must have used Haight in order to publish Tsvetaeva's letter in which Tsvetaeva proclaimed Akhmatova as one of her favourite poets and expressed her admiration for Akhmatova's collection of poetry *Plantain* (Podorozhnik).

It is also important to bear in mind that, to some extent, Akhmatova used Haight in order to mould her own image in the west. Thus Akhmatova encouraged Haight to talk to those people whom she knew very well, including Lidiia Chukovskaya and the Ardov family. Haight refers to Viktor Ardov's publication about the first meeting between Tsvetaeva and Akhmatova that took place in Moscow in 1940 in his flat (his wife Nina Ol'shanskaia was a close friend of Akhmatova), in which he talked about how the two poets had a private conversation in a small room in his flat. According to Ardov, Akhmatova told him and his wife that Tsvetaeva was "a perfectly normal person deeply concerned about her family's fate".[54] Haight's footnotes and commentary related to the publication of Tsvetaeva's letter to Akhmatova also reveal that she had a conversation with Nikolai Khardzhiev in 1966 who had told her about the second meeting of Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva that took place in 1940 in his house. According to their conversation, Khardzhiev did not agree with Akhmatova's self-assessment after the meeting in which Akhmatova described herself as being dull and cow-like in comparison with Tsvetaeva. Khardzhiev told Haight that he was struck by the realisation of "Akhmatova's complete and utter genuineness".[55] It is interesting that Khardzhiev's own memoirs do not mention his impressions of Akhmatova as reported in Haight's article. In contrast to Haight, Khardzhiev portrayed the meeting between the two women poets in such a way that Tsvetaeva was described as a dazzling and charismatic person who was intellectually superior to Akhmatova.[56]

To a large extent, both Haight's biography of Akhmatova that was published in 1976, and her publications that appeared in *The Slavonic and East European Review* provided insightful comments related to Akhmatova's life and various publications of her works in the west. For example, in one of her reviews published in January 1967, Haight asserts that Akhmatova found as totally unsuitable the placing of a 1913 drawing by Sorin as a young girl at the beginning of the 1963 Munich edition of her long poem "Requiem".[57] Despite Haight's close contacts with Akhmatova that enabled her to obtain many valuable archival materials and establish definitive copies of various poems, in her biography of Akhmatova (which was the first biography of Akhmatova written in either English or Russian), Haight presents her object of study as a mouthpiece for Women's Liberation, bringing thereby Akhmatova closer to the concerns of British feminists of the 1970s. Kemball's review of the book finds many shortcomings in Haight's study and finds the translation of Akhmatova's "Requiem" by Haight and Norman as jingle-like. Kemball's overall impression of the book is negative. His verdict suggests that the book is "frustrating to read"; that it is "lacking perceptive judgment" and that at times it is unreliable as well as "trite and trivial". [58] All the errors notwithstanding, as Jane Taubman reminds us, the value of the book lies in the many interesting insights it contained. Taubman suggests that, given Haight's close contacts with Akhmatova and her close friends, her book might be seen as "an authorised biography, which gives us Akhmatova's life much as she might have liked us to see it".[59]

In the same year that Haight's biography of Akhmatova emerged, D.M. Thomas published his translations of Akhmatova's long poems.[60] Taubman describes his translation of Akhmatova's *Requiem* as one of the best among the six translations available to the English speaking readers.[61] According to the American scholar

Sharon Bailey, Akhmatova's long poem "Requiem" "achieves universal significance by appealing to a broad audience and, more importantly by emphasising the magnitude of the atrocity – repeatedly focusing first on the victims as individuals and then on the victims as part of a countless mass".[62]

The universal quality of Akhmatova's elegiac poem became of special interest to two prominent British composers in the 1980s-2000s. Clearly, the process of de-Stalinisation in Russia enabled Russian and western readers to see Akhmatova's text both as a fine example of the poetry of witness and of the oppositional form of writing that foregrounds the theme of maternal suffering as the main subject of the poem. As Boris Katz succinctly argued, Akhmatova's "Requiem" invokes the famous medieval devotional poem about the Virgin Mary's vigil by Christ's cross *Stabat Mater*. According to Katz, this text is "still sung in the Roman Catholic rites at the Feast of the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary" and it was also set to music by many famous composers in numerous oratories that bear the same title.[63] Sir John Tavener (1944-2013), one of the most prominent British post-war composers, converted to the Russian Orthodox Church in 1977 and subsequently in 1980 produced a 50-minute musical composition based on Akhmatova's "Requiem" to which he added some prayers from the Russian Orthodox funeral service. It was performed as a commission at the Edinburgh festival and at the Proms the following year. Albeit Tavener became acquainted with Akhmatova's poetry in English translation undertaken notably by Thomas, he decided to set "Requiem" in the native Russian with the help of Father Sergei Hackel. It is a cycle of fourteen separate poems that focus on suffering and death that are joined together by Tavener into one continuous piece of music. It is scored for strings, brass, percussion, hand bells, and soprano and bass soloists. Parts of the score are based on the Russian Orthodox funeral service, and fragments of

melodies from that liturgy appear sporadically. According to Tavener's statement, he wanted to use the stark scoring of soprano and bass soloists, brass, strings and percussion in order "to convey the grim, numbing cold of the poetry".[64] Stephen Banfield finds the Crucifixion sections, the climax of Tavener's work, to be especially moving. He writes: "The bass and soprano sing, two octaves apart, a monadic chant consisting of upward and downward triads troped from each note of the row, accompanied in the same triads by high *divisi* violins and, canonically and hence polytonally, *divisi* double basses. The effect is remarkable, not least because it reclaims the spiritual paternity of Vaughan Williams for the 1980s".[65] Tavener considered his musical rendering of "Requiem" to be one of his important achievements. He said in one of the interviews: "I regard Akhmatova Requiem as one of the peak achievements of my middle life. Its huge tomb-like structure with the insertions of Russian Orthodox chant give it a grave tone fitting the gravity and tragic passion of Anna Akhmatova's text. It recalls the scoring of the Donne Sonnets with strings, brass and timpani, but it also has the addition of bells and percussion. It nearly lasts an hour with an enormous role for dramatic soprano and interpolations from the bass soloist. The emotional breadth of the poetry inspired the music, but I feel that the strongly ritualistic structure keeps the music from being truly tragic, however it comes closer than any other piece of mine to the tragic."[66]

In 1993 Tavener continued his creative dialogue with Akhmatova and he composed a vocal composition based on Akhmatova's lyrics.[67] He used the translations undertaken by Mother Thekla from the Orthodox Monastery of the Assumption located in Normanby/Whitby in North Yorkshire with whom he was closely associated for several years. In his notes, Tavener elucidates his choice of poems for his composition for soprano and cello in these terms: "The six poems that I

have chosen from Akhmatova were written at different periods in her life. The first three suggest her veneration of other poets - Dante, Pushkin and Lermontov, and Pasternak. In the central poem, Couplet, she mistrusts praise of her own work. Then comes her own longing to write, as the Muse comes. The last poem, Death, looks forward to her own death (with the suggestion of a personal after-life); its inevitability, and her own longing for it. In my settings for soprano and cello I have tried to reflect the deceptive simplicity of the verse, which stems from classical tradition. In the final song, Death, the musical material of the earlier songs is gathered together. Then the poet bids a painful farewell to her beloved homeland, and steps in to the 'cabin' that has been particularly prepared for her."[68] The cycle was first performed by Patricia Rozario and Steven Isserlis on 28 September in 1993 at St Sampson's Church in Cricklade as part of the Cricklade Music Festival.[69] The cycle is concerned with the notion of immortality of art. Tavener uses Akhmatova's voice in order to underscore the role of memory in the spiritual survival of humankind. Prior to composing the cycle based on Akhmatova's lyrics, Tavener was inspired by several icons and he rendered their significance with the help of new symbolic musical language in his choral works of the 1990s but he felt that the Orthodox Church in England was not sufficiently established in order to develop its unique musical language. Subsequently he moved away from the Orthodox Church in England in order to search for a new universal language. His disappointment with the gap between secular and sacred art is captured well in this statement: "Paintings […] moved out of the church and into the art gallery; music has moved into the concert hall. Art's become so disconnected with divine realities […]. I think, we live in a culture in ruins, at the end of an epoch".[70] Given the fact that, in his youth, Tavener was deeply affected by the music of Igor Stravinsky, we could see that his own desire to reinstate the sacred into the artistic

imagination of his contemporaries with the help of Akhmatova's verse was inspired by Stravinsky's belief that "art is by essence constructive" and is "the contrary of chaos".[71]

Unlike Tavener, Elena Firsova, the British composer of Russian origin, turned Akhmatova's long poem into a more universal narrative that could speak to audiences associated with different cultural traditions. The Crucifixion scenes were omitted altogether in her version. The latter significantly contradicts Wendy Rosslyn's 1984 study of religious imagery embedded in Akhmatova's poetry in which the British scholar defines the poet as a holy fool and nun-like.[72] Firsova's composition for soprano, chorus and orchestra "Requiem to Texts of Anna Akhmatova, Op.100" was composed in 2002. It was performed for the first time in Berlin on 6 September 2003. Firsova's musical rendering of Akhmatova's long poem was meant to surpass Boris Tishchenko's *Requiem* that uses Akhmatova's text solely for commemorative purposes, so that the victims of Stalin's terror would not be forgotten in Russia. Tishchenko befriended Akhmatova in the early 1960s. He composed his Requiem for soprano, tenor and orchestra in 1966, when Akhmatova's poem was still unpublished in the Soviet Union. It was performed privately in various locations. One of these private performances was attended by Akhmatova herself. In his book *St. Petersburg: A Cultural History* Volkov also briefly describes one of the private performances.[73] The first concert performance of Tishchenko's "Requiem" took place on 23 June 1989. The conductor was E. Serov, and the soloists were G. Pisarenko, L. Belobragin, V. Naparin, and S. Tkachenko. Some critics note Tishchenko's liking for feminine images, and claim that his interest in female subjectivity is linked to the modernist cult of the Divine Wisdom (Vechnaia zhenstvennost') that was borrowed in his works from the poetry of Russian Symbolists.

In contrast to Tischenko's rendering of Akhmatova as a Russian poet firmly rooted in Russian cultural tradition, Firsova's creative response to the human tragedy portrayed in Akhmatova's narrative poem is strikingly different from that of Tishchenko. Firsova wanted her composition to be seen as a work of art that constructs a universal language of trauma. That is why, as Firsova conveyed to me in her interview, she left out those passages of Akhmatova's work which contained strong Christian connotations.[74] It is clear that Firsova wanted to place herself outside the historical context and to present Akhmatova's work as a metaphorical depiction of human tragedy in general, one that should not be assessed in specific religious terms. Firsova's interest in the polyphonic quality of Akhmatova's verse resulted in the use of interesting intertextual allusions to the music of Dmitrii Shostakovich and Modest Mussorgsky. In this sense, Firsova's interpretation of Akhmatova stands close to Catriona Kelly's understanding of Akhmatova's poetry as a collection of different masks and role-playing situations.

In her introductory note to the translations undertaken by Kelly of Akhmatova's poetry, Kelly describes Akhmatova as a person who is known not only for her love poetry, religious and civic verse but also as the poet who engaged with Russian and European poets of significance and who occasionally wrote herself "into a 'feminine' tradition of verse composition, not only by introducing into her verses idiosyncratic refashionings of that most conventional of feminine poetic figures, the Muse, but also by filling her work with allusions to Russian nineteenth-century literary tradition, to folklore, and to the work of contemporary women poets, such as Adelaide Gersyk and Zinaida Gippius".[75] Kelly's description of Akhmatova's reinvention of the feminine tradition is akin to Joseph Brodsky's portrayal of Akhmatova as the keening Muse.[76] The latter derives from Tsvetaeva's 1915

definition of Akhmatova as the Muse of Lament. The function of lament in classical and later in Western epic is associated with women and that is why it is often defined as female genre.[77] Recent studies on the use of lament in epic genres suggest that female laments are "more subversive of the epic that laments spoken by men" and are usually more private, especially because "they ignore the death-defying *kleos* that provides compensation for heroic sacrifice, a major function of epic".[78] In Brodsky's view, Akhmatova's "Requiem" appropriates traditional aspects of lamenting and undermines the conventions of the art of the epic poet that depends on imitation and on an ability to reproduce images, textual details and plot motifs from the past that give the form its generic authority. "This requiem," declares Brodsky, "mourns the mourners: mothers losing sons, wives, turning widows, sometimes both, as was the author's case. This is the tragedy where the chorus perishes before the hero".[79] Brodsky believes that the degree of compassion with the various voices inscribed into Akhmatova's long poem exemplify how the author is a Russian Orthodox believer. The author's degree of understanding and forgiveness are manifested in the piercing lyricism that reveals the author's sense of time and the uniqueness of her heart.

Brodsky's portrayal of Akhmatova as "a poet of human ties",[80] either cherished, severed or strained, was developed in the poetry of two well known contemporary British poets – Carol Ann Duffy and Elaine Feinstein. They both proclaimed their strong affinity with Akhmatova as a female poet who displayed a stoic resistance to the totalitarian regime in the Soviet Union and who responded to personal tragedies in an empathetic manner. Thus in October 2004 Carol Ann Duffy, the eminent Scottish poet and playwright who was appointed Britain's poet laureate in May 2009, published the short poem in *The Guardian* under the title "After Akhmatova". It reads as follows:

It isn't happiness I seek.
My lover leaves to visit a lover.
I put my tired child to sleep
like a good mother.
I kneel in my cool, calm room
and pray to the angels -
how hard it is to live alone
and to pretend to be cheerful.
I ask for a vision of passion,
walking the path I know too well,
in my usual fashion,
to the cold, stone building on the hill.[81]

The above poem develops the theme of loneliness and of unhappy love embedded in Akhmatova's works. It suggests that Akhmatova's poetry inspired the British female poet to accept that the role of female poets in all times is thorny and burdensome, especially if one happens to be a mother, too. Duffy's poem also contains strong autobiographical overtones and it emulates the confessional style of Akhmatova's verse. It underpins how Akhmatova's poetry encourages the reader to engage in the process of reading the static terrains such as rooms and interiors as a way of reading the modern city.

As Morag Shiag observes, the tradition that depicts the city through the eyes of the flâneur as the heroic figure of modernity probes the reader to see urban locations and situations that "provide both the metaphorical and the literal landscapes of modernist writings" and, subsequently, overlook "the marginalization of the domestic interior" inseparable from the experience of living and writing in the modern

city.[82] It could be argued that for Akhmatova, as with Virginia Woolf, the semantic and social boundaries of rooms were important, especially because they often function as a space of memory and as a framework of identity. The title of Duffy's poem "After Akhmatova" suggests that Duffy consciously inscribes herself into the marginalised tradition that foregrounds the role of urban interiors since they provide female poets with the physical and metaphorical landscape for particular forms of modernist innovation.

In similar manner, Feinstein's poem "Another Toast" demonstrates that the heroic stoicism displayed by Akhmatova's lyric persona is inseparable from the notion of the space of one's own and of the representation of women in interior spaces that resist the domestic. The impulse of resistance the domestic embedded in Akhmatova's worlds appeals to Feinstein because she especially cherishes Akhmatova's ability to sustain creative and intellectual life in a space that is hostile to her modernist sensibilities. Feinstein wanted to emulate Akhmatova's creative response to hardship in her own life and inscribe her identity as a modern poet and a mother into the special tradition of modernist poetry that deals with marginalisation and displacement. The poem was included into the anthology edited by Duffy and it contained original poems chosen by fifty contemporary British poets and their poetic responses to the texts from the past.[83] Feinstein's poem engages with Akhmatova's 1934 poem "The Last Toast" ("Poslednii tost) translated into English by Stanley Kunitz and Max Hayward and reproduced in Duff's anthology. The latter features only one Russian poet. It is a remarkable sign of the recognition of the importance of Akhmatova to post-war British culture.

Here is Feinstein's poem:

She drinks to her ruined home.

My own is not destroyed.

Still, the loneliness in marriage

is something I can toast.

I drink to your hostile stare,

our quarrels, your infidelity,

and what you resented most:

that God did not choose to save you,

and took some pity on me.[84]

It is clear that Feinstein downplays the contextual setting of the original, including Akhmatova's allusions to her family situation in 1934, and chooses to focus on the modernist overtones of the poem. According to Sonia Ketchian, Akhmatova's poem "Last Toast" contains biographical overtones that reflect on her life with the art-historian Nikolai Punin whom she befriended after her close friends Olga Glebova-Sudeikina and Arthur Lourie emigrated in the early 1920s. As Ketchian puts it, "it was "the desolate situation and the void" in Akhmatova's life that brought her and Punin together.[85]

Ketchian suggests that the Akhmatova's "abiding sense of homelessness" that permeates the poem "The Last Toast" never left Akhmatova to her very last days and it partly derives from her experiences of living together with Punin that Akhmatova defined "as loneliness together".[86] Ketchian's analysis of the links between Akhmatova and Punin demonstrates that "the relations between the two were far from amicable and equal"[87] and that in several poems of the 1920s-30s which allude to him Akhmatova felt frustrated that she did not have a space of her own.

I think that both poems that are directed at Punin in the most explicit way – "The Last Toast" (1934) and "I concealed my heart from you…" ("Ot tebia ia serdtse

skryla…," 1936) reveal the complex nature of modernist poetics and ideologies. According to Edward Said, modernism as an aesthetic and ideological phenomenon was a response to the crisis of the filiation-linear and biologically grounded process that "ties children to their parents" and that produced the counter-crisis within modernism of affiliation that prompted philosophers to re-assemble the world in "new non-familial ways".[88] Said's description of the rise of the syndicate, State, political party and guild in modern times as "quasi-paternal" and "affiliatively organised authorities" provided a useful explanation of the description of the ruined house in Akhmatova's above discussed poems. As Barbara Walker demonstrates, Soviet literary culture of the 1920s-early 1930s relied heavily on the notion of patronage and personal networks.[89] Needless to say, Akhmatova would have been excluded from the circle of state-based literary patrons who were supportive of a growing system of welfare and privilege in return for political support. Furthermore, Walker argues compellingly that, in the early 1930s, Stalin took over control of all patronage associations and established himself as "the single de facto patron of the literary world".[90]

Given that Akhmatova's poem "The Last Toast" was written on 27 June 1934, it would be possible to detect in the poem Akhmatova's growing concerns about cultural politics in the Soviet Union in anticipation of the First Congress of Soviet Writers that took place in August 1934 as well as her plea for escape from the claustrophobia and narrow-mindedness of poverty. While Feinstein's poem alludes ironically to the political situation that Akhmatova had to face in the 1930s, it reinforces the point of marginalisation of women writers and their desire to escape inherited modes of domesticity by finding the space and the resources to create rooms that will enable new familial and social groupings that would engage in creative

activities. The frustration with a limited ability to have non-domestic interiors for intellectuals and creative pursuits is well articulated in Jane Harrison's characterisation of modern times. The British classicist and translator Harrison admits that she might be violating codes of femininity when she says that one of the striking signs of modern times is the fact "that woman is beginning to demand a study".[91]

In her 2005 biography of Akhmatova, Feinstein vividly describes Akhmatova's visit to Osip Mandelshtam and his wife Nadezhda in May 1934 and Mandelshtam's arrest on 13 May that was witnessed by Akhmatova. It is highlighted as an important part of Akhmatova's biography. She writes that "Mandelshtam's arrest filled Moscow's literary intelligentsia with dismay and foreboding" and that, subsequently, according to Emma Gershtein's notes featuring Akhmatova and her son Lev, all conversations in the Punin household "had been reported to the authorities and that a friend had been interrogated and arrested that summer".[92] Feinstein describes with sympathy Akhmatova's courage and her desire to help Mandelshtam. She writes that, as one of the members of the audience to whom Mandelshtam recited his poem "Wolf, ""a reckless poem lampooning Stalin's ugliness and his cruel treatment of peasants," Akhmatova could have been arrested herself: "Akhmatova also asked for help from the writer Lydia Seifulillina, who had friends in the secret police and who advised her, doubtless understanding Akhmatova's own vulnerability, not to get involved in the case".[93]

Feinstein also demonstrates how the murder of Kirov on 29 November 1934 resulted in the growing number of arrests and how it affected leading Russian poets and writers, including Akhmatova and Pasternak. She describes the situation in a laconic way, mimicking the directness and lucidity of Akhmatova's own mode of writing: "Everyone was frightened. In the summer of 1935, Akhmatova saw Pasternak

again on his way back from the International Congress of Writers in Paris. Both poets were finding it difficult to write, and Pasternak confided some of his mental problems to her. Akhmatova herself felt as if her muse had abandoned her altogether. To Nina Olshevskaya, she wondered gloomily if she had not already written all she would ever write, since poems no longer came into her head".[94] In the Epilogue, Feinstein provides a useful summary of Akhmatova's legacy in Russia and abroad. "Akmatova," affirms Feinstein, "remains an iconic figure, not of dissidence and resistance alone but as a poet of womanly feeling in a brutal world".[95] Feinstein's feminist reading of Akhmatova's life and works demonstrates well that among British female poets and writers Akhmatova is especially appreciated for her ability to tap for poetry the resources of specifically female experience in the period that was marked by the polarised gender systems when the vision of the New Woman was promoted in real terms as androgyne and politically powerless. Choi Chaterjee elucidates: "Soviet heroines were completely dependent on the state to uphold their authority in both the public and the private sphere. Their power was based on the artificial support extended by the state, not grounded in any fundamental change in popular attitudes or gender relations. Also, since Soviet heroines rarely occupied positions of political power or strategic party posts, they could not form a serious pressure group for women's rights within the system".[96] Akhmatova's example demonstrates well how the official notion of Soviet heroines was imposed upon Soviet writers who were expected to conform to the dogma of Socialist Realist mode of writing. In Akhmatova's case, we see a notion of spiritual equality embedded in Russian nineteenth-century literature as the main ideological and aesthetic principle that inspired her to write her confessional poetry and bypass various propaganda concerns advocated by the Soviet literary establishment.

Akhmatova's resistance to the social order of Soviet times and her ability to speak the truth in a direct and simple way continues to inspire younger generation of British poets. For example, Clare Shaw's 2012 collection of poetry *Head On* includes a powerful poem "I don't believe in silence" that refers to Akhmatova as a female poet whom she would like to emulate in her works. Here is one stanza from Shaw's poem:

> I don't believe in silence. […]
> because of Levi and Akhmatova
> because of the blue-lipped prisoner;
> the itch and the scratch of my pen;
> I believe in the word.[97]

Shaw's appreciation of the power of the word conveyed in Akhmatova's works testifies to how Akhmatova's poetry continues to serve as a good example of where the defining features of the lyric revolve around the notion of innate opposition to collectivity and materiality. As Theodor Adorno reminds us, the reader usually experiences lyric poetry as "something opposed to society" and "something wholly individual".[98] Shaw's poem advocates the need for a civic poetry in contemporary Britain because she knows well that any society based on the principles of conformism and totalitarian control lead to the destruction of individuality and creativity. For Shaw, Akhmatova stands out as a pure lyricist who uses private lyric in order to perform public service, giving voice to mute suffering and shared solitude, creating thereby a community of truth-seekers.

As outlined above, engagement in Great Britain over the last hundred years with Akhmatova's poetry has been highly fruitful and enriching. Akhmatova's subject matter and her language converged with the aesthetic needs of British poets, readers,

scholars and translators who lived through the tumultuous times, especially during World Wars I and II. On a personal level, many poets, biographers, and translators became moved and inspired by her stoicism and by her resistance to totalitarian practices and misfortunes. Akhmatova's personal ties with Britain and her close bond with the famous canonical authors – such as Dante, Shakespeare, Browning and Eliot – enabled British readers to relate to the metaphorically conveyed situations of Akhmatova's personal life in the idiom that made her imagery and language more universal and more familiar to them. Thus Shaw's juxtaposition of Akhmatova to Primo Levi is important in underlying the need for commemorative and mnemonic functions of poetry in a contemporary society. The confessional style of Akhmatova's poems is oriented towards the poetics of community that has its roots in the epic genre. Traditionally, epic poetic narratives are associated with the description of deeds of significance and heroic action, but Akhmatova's understanding of it is more akin to that of Walter Benjamin who envisioned epic as a genre inseparable from a popular spirit.[99] In his view, it relies on a storyteller who represents a wider community and whose manner of narrating stories is alive and oral. Likewise, Akhmatova's image in the British canon of Russian literature resembles Benjamin's description of the storyteller whose stories provide a voice for a community and is ever changing. In Akhmatova's case, the voices that are embodied in her stories – as manifested in her essays, verse and diary notes – represent the generation that "squandered its poets", to use Roman Jakobson's words.[100]

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